

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 274 209

FL 016 093

AUTHOR Trim, John
TITLE Language Needs and Social Policy.
PUB DATE 85
NOTE 11p.; In: Second Language Learning: Research Problems and Perspectives. Papers from a Conference on Second Language Learning (Birmingham, England, February 24-26); see FL 016 092.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Educational Research; Foreign Countries; *Language Research; *Learning Processes; *Public Policy; *Research Needs; *Second Language Instruction; Second Language Learning
IDENTIFIERS Great Britain

ABSTRACT

This paper suggests that research in applied linguistics in Great Britain has recently had little impact on the learning and teaching of foreign languages and that new priorities for relevant research in second language learning and teaching need to be proposed. The objective of the new research would be to ensure that language skills be available to meet the commercial, industrial, diplomatic, and military requirements of the country as well as the social and cultural development of the individuals of that society in the foreseeable future. Potential areas of research include the present and anticipated needs of trading partners in those areas, intercultural or interlingual communication, and the contribution of technological developments to language teaching. (MSE)

* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *

LANGUAGE NEEDS AND SOCIAL POLICY

John Trim

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS
MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

B. Newson

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES
INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)

☒ This document has been reproduced as
received from the person or organization
originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve
reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this docu-
ment do not necessarily represent official
OERI position or policy.

1. Language needs and social policy

John Trim

The holding of this conference represents in some ways a statement of faith by CILY that it is both desirable and possible to identify the areas in which research can effectively be carried out which will increase our understanding of second language learning. We wish to do so, of course, in the expectation that researchers and those who support their work will be stimulated to direct research effort into projects which, from this point of view, can be seen to be both useful and practicable. We are glad to hear that the National Council for Modern Languages in Higher and Further Education intends to follow up this conference by another which would consider the funding of research.

A humanistic view of language studies in universities takes their purpose as being 'to provide through linguistic and literary studies a humane education which may, or may not, be vocationally useful'. This is the context within which most modern language research is conducted. Various kinds of modern language research can be distinguished: literary research still predominates; traditional philological scholarship has declined, and mainstream linguistic research - for example, into the properties of grammars - has so far offered little scope for practical application to language learning and teaching. Work in applied linguistics has greatly enriched the teaching of English as a foreign language, but has until recently had little impact on the learning and teaching of foreign languages. It seems worthwhile to review this position and take a more general view of needs and priorities for research relevant to second language learning and teaching.

The reasons for and effects of the continuing dominance of literary research merit consideration. Those disciplines which primarily relate to languages, that is English and modern languages, are usually classified as 'arts' or 'humanities'. As such, they are concerned with the promotion of literary scholarship (the distinction between research and scholarship is extremely blurred in the humanities), and so research is channelled overwhelmingly into the study of literary figures and literary movements. All but some six of the 80 pages listing research in the 1982-1983 guide to research in progress in French (Society for French Studies, 1983) are on literary topics. The mechanisms which control finance, organisation and recruitment are all strongly self-reinforcing. The autonomy of departments in determining their teaching programmes and conducting examinations, monitored only by colleagues they have chosen as suitable,

inevitably means that undergraduate teaching is directly related to the research interests of university staff and, in many cases, this is overtly stated.

All these factors encourage the staff of university language departments to spend their lives relatively unchallenged in a closed society. This society is, however, increasingly set in amber. Its attempt, through 'A'-level syllabuses, to create sixth forms in its own image writ small is increasingly unacceptable to schools, and teachers find themselves equipped with knowledge and skills they cannot use yet lacking in those they need - while other employers of graduates have made it clear on a number of occasions that they do not look to universities to produce truly advanced language skills. Thus the Air Transport and Travel Industry Training Board research report 80/2 Foreign languages in the air transport industry states on page 27, 'Once management has decided to give its backing to foreign languages, it is clear that there is no use in relying on the education system to produce linguists'. However it is difficult to see why, if left to itself, the present system should not be almost indefinitely self-perpetuating.

There was an attempt, in the 1960s, to co-ordinate and steer research and development work relevant to the learning and teaching of modern languages, and to provide some special funding to stimulate work in areas thought to be in the national interest. The Committee on Research and Development in Modern Languages (CRDML), established in 1964, was short-lived, however, and for many reasons its work did not produce the dramatic short-term improvement in language teaching which its sponsors may have hoped to see. In 1970, when CRDML was wound up, the official view seems to have been that modern languages had had special consideration for long enough and should now receive no more support and financial encouragement than any other curricular subject. Since 1970, there has been no machinery to co-ordinate research work in the area of second language learning and teaching or to establish priorities in the light of an overall social policy or to promote research work of an appropriate kind.

Of course, modern languages have continued to receive special support in that central government funding for CILT has been maintained. CILT's register of research in progress, as well as its conferences and publications, have all been designed to keep researchers in touch with each other, to keep them well-informed of developments within the field, and to facilitate a two-way interaction between teaching and research. In this way, the activities of CILT have, we believe, played a useful part in stimulating and supporting research. However, the role of CILT is defined in its Trust Deed as the collection and dissemination of information. It has no remit, and no budget, for funding research.

To turn to the matter of establishing priorities: the basis for such a move might be

1. the identification of those research problems, the solution of which is fundamental to the understanding of the processes of second language acquisition and learning and is a necessary prerequisite for more applied studies;
2. agreement upon language needs and social policy.

Public policy in the language field may be directed towards

1. ensuring that language skills are available to meet the commercial, industrial, diplomatic and military requirements of the country as they may be expected to develop over the next, say, twenty years;
2. promoting the social and cultural development of the individuals who constitute the society concerned.

That attempts should be made to guide research on a national level in this way is, of course, not self-evident or universally accepted. State studentships, for instance, have traditionally been awarded on the basis of individual merit and without subject quotas or reference to public policy. I was myself verbally assured on one occasion that, if the top ten firsts in the country wished to study Egyptology, then that would be the direction in which the money would go. The research councils, on the other hand, have been under steady and increasing pressure to promote research which clearly serves the national interest. In an area where postdoctoral funded research scarcely exists, an apparently non-interventionist stance on the part of those who fund postgraduate research leaves the responsibility for its direction in the hands of individual departments. This does not mean that there is no policy. It means rather that that policy is determined not by considerations of national interest but by the existing ideology and career structure of the universities.

Such a critique as the one I have set out above is, of course, far too sweeping and general. It is almost certain to alienate and even insult members of this conference who, by their very acceptance of our invitation, have shown themselves to be outside this picture. A number particularly of the newer universities have a much stronger practical orientation and have long application lists from would-be students. Our system of university financing, however, goes far to prevent that demand being effective. Again, the polytechnics and similar institutions of higher education in the public sector have a different approach and are generally much more concerned to produce the kind of linguistic proficiency in their graduates which one would expect industry and commerce to welcome. However, polytechnics have not been officially encouraged to regard research as an integral part of their activity as have universities. Nevertheless, some interesting and important research projects have been undertaken within the polytechnics and colleges. I might cite as simply

one example the survey of language needs in polytechnics carried out by Ealing College of Higher Education (Gardner and Winslow, 1982) with the co-operation of the Standing Conference of Heads of Modern Languages in Polytechnics and Other Colleges.

The investigation of language needs in society generally is notoriously difficult since the term may cover a very wide range of concepts, such as expectations, demands, interests, necessities, motivations, desires, ideas and even fantasies (Richerich, 1983, p 2). Commerce and industry have shown relative indifference in the face of continuing attempts by the language teaching profession to engage their interest. It is not clear whether this is due to a low level of linguistic requirement on the part of the United Kingdom in view of its special linguistic position, or to a low level of awareness in industry and commerce of the advantages to be gained in world markets and collaborative ventures by increased linguistic skills on the part of their work force, or to a low level of confidence on their part in the ability of the public education system to produce the right kind of product. Investigations reported over the last decade (York survey on the use of foreign languages in the private sector of industry and commerce (Emmans and others, 1974), Royal Society of Arts BETRO Trust report 1979, Air Transport and Travel Industry Training Board Research Report 1980) indicate that all three are present.

When dealing with countries which are not at home with English our insistence on communicating only on our terms in our language (or even more our complacent assumption that of course the other party will use English) has, in my view, caused Britain to acquire a - perhaps deservedly - poor reputation in these respects. This failure is, in my view, at least partially responsible for the distortions in our trade figures for January-November 1983. These show us to have a positive balance with North America and the Commonwealth, but to be in deficit with Europe. Significantly, we are in balance with France whose language dominates our educational scene. Deficits with all German-speaking countries account for two-thirds of our world trade deficit. We have only weak penetration into the German home market, although it is open to us under EC arrangements well-respected by the German government. It is well known that Germans 'sell in English but buy in German'. We have no penetration into the Japanese home market, and also a large deficit with Latin America (perhaps exacerbated by political factors). Trade with the Soviet Union runs at a very low level, though experts such as Professor Pockney (University of Surrey) consider it ripe for a considerable expansion.

A number of important questions arise:

1. Can a national languages policy be arrived at without definite information on the present and expected future needs of the country in respect of commerce, industry, public services, diplomacy and possible military requirements?

2. Does an adequate information base already exist?
3. If not, are the means for carrying out an investigation of national needs available, or should they be developed?
4. Do we now have that 'clarification of the general concepts and methodology involved in forecasting national manpower needs' that the Department of Education and Science found to be lacking in 1970 (Committee on Research and Development in Modern Languages, 1971, p 10)?
5. Is an enquiry into national language needs in fact necessary and desirable?

If business use is uncertain, Department of Trade and Industry and British Tourist Authority figures show that personal travel increased in the decade 1972-82 in both directions: 'to the UK' by 56%, 'overseas by UK residents' by 93%. Between 1981 and 1982 visits abroad rose by 8% to just over 20 million. Overseas visitors to this country rose by 2% to 11½m. Of the visits out 17½m were to the European Community and other parts of Western Europe with France and Spain accounting for 8½m of these. 7m of the 11½m visitors to this country came from Western Europe. Though the figure of 11½m visitors to this country seems small compared with 123m trips taken by British residents in Britain in 1982, the number of nights spent away from home is in the proportion of 136.8m from abroad to 505m within the country. It seems clear that personal mobility, upon which the Council of Europe has based its language policy, is increasing at a considerable rate, even through the present period of depression.

While the Mediterranean countries are popular tourist goals, it is noteworthy that the steepest rate of increase in British visits was to the Low Countries, which are not traditional tourist goals. The predominance of France as a tourist goal may justify to some extent the dominance of French in the British educational system or, of course, it may be in some ways a consequence of that dominance. Since business trips accounted for about one seventh of visits abroad and one fifth of visits to this country, it seems that private reasons predominate. It would be interesting to know to what extent and for what purposes the 13m British visitors abroad who were not on package holidays used or felt the need for foreign languages and, similarly, how many of the 11½m visitors to this country were dealt with or would have wished to be dealt with in a language other than English. Overall, the British travel account shows a negative balance of £466m for 1982. This was entirely accounted for by a deficit with Western Europe of £1,400m not compensated for by the surplus of a little under £1000m with North America and other areas. (British Business, 15-21 July 1983, and Tourism Intelligence Quarterly, vol 6 no. 4, 1983.)

While I have at the time of writing no information on the use of foreign language media, e.g. books, newspapers, films etc, in the

United Kingdom (beyond the astonishing 1.8m audience for Buongiorno Italia in 1982-83), mobility figures seem to justify the belief that the most important individual motivation for language learning will be the desire to communicate directly with foreign language speakers in face-to-face situations. If this is so, then the processes of face-to-face interaction involving the use of a foreign language require more careful investigation than they have so far received. Linguistic orthodoxy has strongly favoured pluralism with regard to forms of speech current among native speakers within a linguistic community. The attitude to foreign speakers has been remarkably normative and puristic. It has been assumed that the forms used by groups of foreigners which deviate from native speaker norms are errors, having no status or right to exist even where they are characteristic of large groups of speakers and have no deleterious effect upon communication. The eradication of these 'errors' has often been the main aim of language teaching, at the expense of such desirable things as the growth of confidence, the development of communication strategies using limited means and the increase in available resources.

A good deal of research has been carried out in recent years, with regard primarily to English and secondarily to German, in such areas as discourse analysis, conversational analysis, text linguistics, speech act analysis, the analysis of language as social action. With the exception of work on clarification and repair strategies, relatively little research has been undertaken into the detailed processes of co-operation and communication in a second language. Are the techniques equally applicable to conversations between native and non-native speakers or between non-native speakers using a third language as a lingua franca? If so, are the results helpful to the planning of language learning and language teaching and, if so, in what ways? We should perhaps remember that (as in first language acquisition) the communicative success of a reduced linguistic system may cause it to ossify and be thus a barrier to further learning.

Questions such as these may become increasingly important in the course of the next generation - and in planning the education of children now we have, of course, to think in terms of the early years of the third millennium rather than the end of the twentieth century. A growing density of communication, with increasing interpersonal contacts between speakers of different languages, normally leads to a greater interpenetration of the languages concerned, with the participating languages exchanging loan-words, employing an increasing proportion of international words, using calques or literal translations, affecting all linguistic levels including syntax. The direction of linguistic influences is the result of social pressures of varying kinds. The influence is to some extent mutual, though at the moment the predominant influence in the European area is from (American) English. In this light, the model of French and

German currently taught in schools is very puristic. Educated German speech and, particularly, writing employs foreign words and loan-words on a large scale. These have generally been replaced by 'proper German words' in language teaching textbooks. How far can the acceptance of the natural process go without acquiring the stigma of pidginisation or macaronic speech?

Macaronic conversations are possible in another sense, that is that each speaker uses his native language, calling upon a wide range of its resources, tailored perhaps to some extent by the fact of talking to a non-native speaker, and understands the language used by the interlocutor. Procedures of this sort are already not uncommon in international conferences or small international working groups that operate without simultaneous interpretation. What is known of this form of interaction? What differences are entailed in the kind of mental operation required of the participants? What in turn is implied for the objectives and process of language learning? To what extent can and should problem-solving strategies be incorporated into language learning - indeed, to what extent can they even replace language learning? This question may become increasingly relevant as technical devices based on microprocessors in miniaturised equipment invade the language-using scene. We already have primitive mechanised phrase-books and dictionaries, some of them incorporating speech synthesis circuits. What developments in such devices can be expected over the next, say, ten years?

In addition to the far from exhausted possibilities of increasingly complex and cheapening microcomputers, a further important technical development is satellite television, which will make authentic materials in different foreign languages immediately available. How far, of course, this will wean viewers away from their favourite channel is not at all clear. The immediate availability of an indefinitely large number of radio stations has clearly not had that effect. Television, however, with its more immediate appeal and the greater accessibility of the video channel, may have quite different consequences.

I have attempted to outline above some of the many factors that must be taken into account in formulating a social policy to govern the specification of objectives for language learning programmes. I have not taken into account the more general educational objectives relating to the cognitive, affective and social development of individuals within an educational system, either those which are common to all curricular subjects or those for which modern languages appear to play some special role; they too must be taken into account, particularly when advocating particular kinds of learning and teaching method. A central question must be: how far can decisions on the objectives of language learning programmes be arrived at by appropriate pieces of research or how far are they more quickly, and perhaps more effectively, arrived at by a combination of intuition and

experience? We should also like to know to what extent global objectives, having been set down in terms perhaps of language use, can be converted into fully specified syllabuses and, further, how the necessary build-up of competence, skills and strategies can be accomplished under different conditions. If we consider, for example, programmes for migrants immersed in a new society, with limited educational experience, or for children in schools learning a foreign language, or for adults preparing themselves to face new job demands, the identifiable parameters will be different. Accordingly, the aims and objectives, the modes of use and the conditions of learning will be different.

In what ways can research in linguistics, both theoretical and applied, in sociolinguistics and in psycholinguistics help those who have to organise and carry out such teaching programmes to make the best provision for those for whom they are responsible? How much of this research has already been carried out, so that it is a matter of making research findings or research procedures better known and more generally usable? How far do such decisions ultimately rest upon factors that we do not understand either because the research, though conceived, has not been carried out, or perhaps because the right questions have not yet been asked? If this conference can ensure, firstly, that the right questions are identified and that ways of answering them are adumbrated and that the teaching profession in its broadest sense - what I have called the partnership for learning - is made aware of relevant research and given access to its findings, then our time will have been very well spent.

REFERENCES

AIR TRANSPORT AND TRAVEL INDUSTRY TRAINING BOARD (1980). Foreign languages in the air transport industry; ed Sue Fleming. Staines: Air Transport and Travel ITB. (Research Report 80/2.)

COMMITTEE ON RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT IN MODERN LANGUAGES (1971). Second report. London: HMSO. (Department of Education and Science; Scottish Education Department.)

EMMANS, K, E Hawkins and A Westoby (1974). The use of foreign languages in the private sector of industry and commerce. (Cover title: Foreign languages in industry/commerce.) York: Language Teaching Centre, University of York.

GARDNER, P H and J D Winslow (1982). Language needs in higher education. (Ealing College of Higher Education for SCHML.)

RICHTERICH, R (1983). Case studies in identifying language needs. Oxford etc: Pergamon for the Council of Europe.

ROYAL SOCIETY OF ARTS. BETRO Trust (1979). A study of languages and export performance; a study prepared for the BETRO Trust Committee of the Royal Society of Arts by the P-E Consulting Group. London: Royal Society of Arts.

SOCIETY FOR FRENCH STUDIES (1983). Current research in French studies at universities and polytechnics in the United Kingdom: 1982-1983, vol 15; comp K H Francis. (Egham: The Society.)